

CLIMATE ACTION PLAN

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND COUNCILS

**A 40-point plan to tackle the climate and
nature emergency.**

Northern Ireland local council responsibilities

Our goal is to ensure that our climate and nature protection and restoration goals are front and centre in all decision-making and investments, and inclusive engagement with citizens ensures that the changes made are just and sustainable.

Northern Ireland's councils don't have as much authority as their equivalents in England, Scotland, and Wales, or the Republic of Ireland.

Although almost all areas of public policy have been devolved to Northern Ireland, they lie mostly with the Northern Ireland Assembly. That said, there are many opportunities to influence council policy and responsibilities to help shape the transition to a just, sustainable post-fossil fuel world, in which well-being, health, protection of nature, and active, participatory democracy are what define communities.

Local councils have responsibility for the follow areas, among others:

- **Waste collection, treatment, and recycling**
- **Local planning including Local Development Plans**
- **Community planning**
- **Civic amenity**
- **Health and safety**
- **Environmental protection**
- **Environmental improvement**
- **Estate management**
- **Building control**
- **Parks, open spaces, and playgrounds**
- **Community centres and leisure centres**
- **Arts, heritage, and culture**
- **Off-street parking and**
- **Local economic development, including business start-ups, youth and social entrepreneurship, investing for women and neighbourhood renewal funding.**

It is in these areas where there is potential to influence climate focused action. The exact details of a council's Climate Action Plan will vary from council to council depending on factors such as the urban/rural split, the extent of the public transport infrastructure, the extent of green spaces, and the size of the council's estate. Friends of the Earth can suggest a range of possible actions, but the precise content of a Climate Action Plan must be decided at a council level based on the best evidence, and following full community participation.

Climate Action Plans

Below are a range of possible actions for a local council Climate Action Plan. They are based on Friends of the Earth's assessment of where significant carbon reductions can be made that also have a positive impact on community well-being and promote participative democracy.

Putting our climate at the heart of decision-making, including COVID-19 recovery

Our goal is to ensure that our climate and nature restoration goals are front and centre in all decision-making and investments, including COVID-19 recovery plans, and inclusive engagement with citizens ensures that the changes made are sustainable. We will...

Tick

1	Ensure all decisions, including planning decisions and policies, are informed by an analysis of whether they would help or hinder meeting climate, air pollution, green infrastructure plans, or biodiversity action plans.	
2	Identify councillors, committees or working groups as Climate and Nature Champions who are required to publish a bi-annual independent and audited report to the public on progress in meeting climate change and nature targets.	
3	Align all council statutory and non-statutory plans, policies and guidance with respective carbon reduction pathways and nature restoration plans, including areas such as procurement and infrastructure development.	
4	Set interim and measurable targets for a just recovery plan to develop a green economy, including reskilling, and achieve net zero greenhouse reductions and meet nature restoration goals.	
5	Use additional decision-making approaches for complicated or contentious choices (such as representative Citizens' assemblies/citizens' juries, participatory mapping and budgeting).	
6	Review and improve how the council involves citizens in existing decision-making processes, with a plan to move to a fully participative system.	
7	Ensure that voices of the most vulnerable communities are properly represented in council decision-making and council-citizen deliberations.	
8	Develop climate education projects and public information messaging to ensure public support for climate action.	

Raising money

Our goal is to have sufficient resources to invest in the changes needed to restore nature and meet climate goals, so that our council can reap the dividends and deliver our fair share of reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. We will...

Tick

9	Raise bonds to fund low-carbon infrastructure and community development projects.	
10	Use planning fees, developer contributions, and other mechanisms to fund climate actions and nature restoration projects.	
11	Introduce a workplace car parking levy and/or similar initiative to fund sustainable transport.	
12	Identify the most vulnerable people in the areas most at risk of flooding, high heat levels, and other climate shocks, and target adaptation policies, actions and spending to these people and areas.	

Buildings

Our goal is to ensure all homes are well insulated to a minimum of EPC level C, to eradicate fuel poverty as fast as possible, and to install our fair share of the 1 million eco-heating heat pumps that need to be fitted in the UK each year. We will...

Tick

13	Retrofit council-owned properties with high levels of insulation and heat pumps where possible.	
14	Enforce minimum building standards, and lobby the Northern Ireland Executive to introduce higher building standards to ensure greater levels of energy efficiency and sustainability of building materials.	

Transport

Our goal is to significantly and rapidly increase the proportion of people that travel by cycling, e-bikes and walking, as well as public transport when safe to do so, in order meet World Health Organisation's air pollution standards and climate goals. We will...

Tick

15	Develop and promote active travel schemes, such as bike hire, loans for bikes, and safe walking routes.	
16	Encourage and facilitate working from home and decentralising workspace to reduce the need for people to travel.	
17	Deliver a rapid transition of the council's own fleet to electric.	
18	Require deliveries to the council to be by electric vehicles or bike (eg through setting-up a distribution centre for onward deliveries by clean vehicles).	
19	Introduce differential charges for off-street parking.	
20	Reduce the need to own and use a car through managing the location and design of new developments in the local plan to ensure low-carbon connectivity.	

Power

Our goal is to enable and support the growth and use of renewable energy, ensure energy is not wasted, and prevent the development of new fossil fuel extraction. We will...

Tick

21	Significantly grow renewable energy generation through identifying areas suitable for renewable energy in the local plan and/or through issuing a new Supplementary Planning Document.	
22	Reduce energy used by the council in its own estate, including leisure centres, civic amenity sites, and cemeteries.	
23	Use the council estate to generate energy for the broader community, where possible.	
24	Require the integration of renewable energy such as solar thermal, photovoltaic panels (PV) or heat pumps in council developments and within private and public sector developments.	
25	Support the development of renewable energy and energy storage, with priority given to community-owned schemes.	
26	Oppose fracking and other fossil fuel extraction, new fossil fuel infrastructure, and oppose the use of gas extracted through fracking in council properties.	
27	Lobby the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) to divest from fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy projects.	

Waste

Our goal is to be a sustainable consumption and zero-waste area, where all waste is minimised, recycled or reused as part of a circular economy approach. We will...

Tick

28	Aim to send zero waste to landfill or incineration.	
29	Use food waste according to the food waste hierarchy of prevent, reuse and recycle, and ensure remaining non-recyclable biodegradable waste is used to generate biogas, with priority given to community-owned anaerobic digestion facilities.	
30	Adopt circular economy policies in relevant plans, procurement, and contracts.	
31	Promote community sharing and reuse to reduce waste and unnecessary consumption.	
32	Ban the use of single-use plastic in council offices and premises.	
33	Provide specific support to SME businesses to access funds and expertise for reducing carbon pollution, supporting resilience, and developing their role in the green economy.	

Land use

Our goal is to ensure everyone has access to nature in nearby green spaces and to restore nature to help draw down carbon pollution from the atmosphere. We will...

Tick

34	Develop a strategy to at least double tree cover on council-owned land, using appropriate native species, update local planning strategies to at least double tree cover across the local authority area, and ensure existing trees are properly protected in order to store carbon, support nature, improve soils and water quality, and aid flood protection and urban design.	
35	Protect existing local green spaces, the green belt and locally designated nature sites.	
36	Develop new quality green spaces in areas where they don't exist, particularly in neighbourhoods where people are particularly vulnerable to heatwaves and/or are deprived of nature.	
37	Manage council-owned land to increase biodiversity and drawdown carbon pollution, including through phasing out pesticide use and increased planting of wildflowers.	
38	Produce a nature and ecosystem restoration plan to reverse and restore habitats and species and ecosystem quality and function.	

Campaigning

Our goal is to make our voice heard by the UK government and secure increased devolution to local level and increased democratic control. We will...

Tick

39	Work with other local authorities, government departments and agencies, NGOs, and other allies to secure more regulatory powers, fundraising powers and finance to deliver a just and sustainable transition to a low-carbon future, and join forces with others to push for a national Climate Action Plan that is commensurate with the climate and nature emergency.	
40	Develop a just recovery plan to ensure that we build back better and emerge from the multiple crises people are facing – climate, ecological decline, poverty, and physical and mental ill-health.	

Local authority bonds

Local council incomes come primarily from the district rate, with additional funds coming from central funds for specific projects, and fees and charges for services, such as planning fees. There should also be scope for local authorities to make investments in their areas of responsibility by raising bond finance securitised against the district rate.

At a minimum, such bonds could be used to invest in energy efficiency and renewable energy options for the local authority estate, such as council offices, leisure centres, and civic amenity sites. However, the council could also use funds raised by such bonds to pay for any projects within its remit. This would produce very rapid returns for the ratepayer as the pay-back period for some of these measures would be as little as two to three years.

Section 76 Agreements

Section 76 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 allows local authorities to make agreements with landowners or developers as a condition of planning consent. The agreement can specify how the land should be used, what activities may be carried out, or require payment to the council. Councils can use Section 76 Agreements to raise funds for climate mitigation or adaptation, or community development projects.